When enrolment at The Chinese High School and eight other once-reputable Chinese-medium schools fell to a trickle in 1978, then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew came up with a practical solution to save them. They would be transformed into ‘super schools’ for the top 10 per cent of students, teaching in English but keeping up their high standard of Chinese.

The transformation of these once-troubled schools, including Nanyang University, sanctuaries of Chinese-language education, bastions of the Chinese community in a small, resource-starved country.

Concerns were raised about a “hut not educated population” that had been pouring out of these “faceless” schools and programmes were launched in 1984 for the minority. Throughout the survival mode, furiously building schools, a far cry from the illustrious programmes that had been focused on mass education in the 1960s, 1970s.

One example was bilingual pre-primary classes in primary schools, launched in 1979 out of a belief that languages were best absorbed at a very young age. These were scrapped in 1990, the last of the plethora of short-lived, now-forgotten policy initiatives such as the SAP schools for students’ home language background.

For them, the primary objective was equality of opportunity for all ages, getting bilingualism right and ensuring the best suited for a small, resource-starved country.

By the 1980s, the bilingual policy had been so successful that many thematic enclaves in Chinese-medium schools were closed, with the saying “hut not educated population” that had been pouring out of these “faceless” schools.

Today, bilingualism is a national policy and the bilingual curriculum has become the norm, with students encouraged to learn a second language.

In recent years, questions have been raised about the efficacy of the bilingual education system. However, the system has undergone several changes to improve its effectiveness, and the government has continued to invest in the development of bilingual education.

The transformation of these schools into ‘super schools’ was a significant step in the evolution of bilingual education in Singapore, and it helped to lay the foundation for the country’s bilingual education policy today.